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A WORKING HYPOTHESIS FOR RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

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PERHAPS the real object of all serious theorizing is the formulation of a working hypothesis, a practical program whose correctness in every particular may not yet have been thoroughly proved, but whose truth in the main has become so assured as to amount almost to certainty. And it would seem that all the recent discussion as to the spirit and methods of religious instruction had but paved the way for some general statement which may be to the pastor, the superintendent, the teacher, and the parent what the atomic theory, the molecular theory, or the evolutionary theory is to the chemist, the physicist, or the biologist.

The fundamental postulate in education is that man must be regarded as a unity. We may no longer speak of him as made up of several more or less distinct "natures," as though he were a peculiar aggregation of groups of faculties held apart from one another in compartments. The conception of man as an organism involves a correlation of forces, and consequently a harmony of development, so as to secure for the life its highest and completest expression. The day is past when we may think of the physical nature as something apart from the intellectual nature, or of physical training as a process distinct from education in the broader sense. We may still, as a matter of convenience, consider the life of man as it stands related now to material things, now to the world of ideas, now to its fellow-beings, or to the Supreme Being, but nevertheless it is always one life we are studying, and to attempt to dissect it into a physical life, an intellectual life, and a spiritual life is to employ an anatomical phraseology as fanciful as it is misleading. A

leading educator has well reminded us that we must regard education as one process, the training of the whole man into a symmetrical development.

Starting with this postulate that man is a unity, the problem of education consists in discovering the periods in the unfolding of the child-life which are most favorable to its development in various directions, as it is brought into constantly changing relationship to its many-sided environment; in furnishing at such periods the proper material for such development; and in applying the proper stimuli, so that every power may have its appropriate exercise, and the unity of nature be conserved and strengthened rather than impaired. Any education is deficient, and any system of education is incomplete, which fails of this.

We are here concerned, however, with the application of our theory to the work of religious instruction. The great need is that parents and teachers and pastors recognize that adequate religious instruction is not only the birthright of every child, but that it is a part of that larger education which he is to receive, whether at the hands of parents, the state, or society at large. Training in religion must be regarded, not as something apart from other training, but as so related to it as together to form the interrelated parts of one whole. The problem is how to bring the forces of religious instruction into such a complete coördination with the other forces of education that a full-rounded and harmonious development shall result, and the first essential must be a clear conception of what religious instruction should comprehend.

Religious instruction may be defined as the drawing out of the vital powers on the Godward side; the development of a consciousness of God and of the sense of personal relationship to him, dependence upon him, responsibility to him, and the stimulation to habitual effort for him. This includes, of course, the elements of worship, belief, and conduct, and in all these directions there must be training, the supplying of the proper material for growth in the proper manner and at the proper time. The nature of this material, the time most favorable for its reception and assimilation, and the agencies which are to provide

it, are the chief factors to be considered in attempting the solution of the problem of religious instruction. It is not possible to draw sharp lines of distinction between all these in the sense that the element of worship, for instance, may occupy the attention of the instructor regardless of what the belief or the conduct may be: in order to establish the sense of personal relationship to God, the element of worship, that is, meditation, prayer, praise, is essential; some knowledge of God and some faith are involved; some effect on character is inevitable. But the attitude of reverence may be cultivated, and the child needs to be trained to express himself in prayer and praise; he needs to be instructed in such fundamental facts of revelation and experience as shall lead to an intelligent and reasoning faith; he needs to be led to choose habitually those things which are in accord with the will of God. And there are certain times in the life of the child which are peculiarly favorable for laying especial emphasis now upon one, now upon another, of these phases of instruction, just as there are certain agencies already at hand which are peculiarly adapted to work preëminently along one or another of these lines.

In the historical development of religion the element of worship would seem to have come first; the element of belief, including the intellectual statements of belief, as expressed in creeds and philosophies and theologies, has followed; and the element of conduct has been the last to receive its due amount of emphasis. Perhaps this may be taken as a natural order to follow in the training of the child. The natural and proper beginnings of religious instruction are the little bed-time prayers and hymns which baby lips are taught to lisp at the mother's knee, accompanied by confidential talks about the great mysteries of life, as they already begin to dawn upon the child intelligence. The spirit of reverence and thanksgiving may be further fostered by the words of grace before each meal, some of which the child may be taught to repeat, and by the few moments spent each day in family prayer. Thus the home becomes the first great agency in the matter of religious instruction, in order both of time and of importance, laying its foundation of

reverence and of love, of worship and of faith, and furnishing by its atmosphere the first ideals of fatherhood and brotherhood which are later to serve as the symbols of God's relation to us and of our relation to our fellow-man.

Next to the home stands related the Sunday school, with its extended period of instruction and its elaborate machinery. This venerable institution seems to be entering upon a period of new life and of vastly increased usefulness, as its purpose is becoming more clearly perceived and its aim made more definite. As a result of the careful study which has been given to the problems connected with the Sunday school, there appears to be a growing consensus of opinion that its training must emphasize particularly the intellectual side of religious instruction, furnishing the child with that knowledge of God which comes through a systematic and thorough study of the facts connected with the Bible and growing out of it. Teachers have come to realize that this rich material must be presented to the child, however, as he is able to receive it, and hence that both pupils and lesson studies must be graded, so as to adapt the truth to the constantly enlarging mental horizon of the child. We must still wait for an ideal lesson system and a comprehensive curriculum which shall carry the child properly through the successive steps of knowledge, and prepare the way for a sturdy and intelligent faith; but enough has already been done to reveal the general order of such instruction. Stories, rich in the imagery of nature and full of the living personality of noble men, whose biographies make up so large and fascinating a part of the Old Testament and the New, may well form the entrance to this temple of knowledge. Biography may give place to history, the history of that wonderfully religious people whose evolution is exhibited to us in the pages of Scripture. A little later may come the literary study of the Bible, book by book and author by author; this to be followed by the study of the teaching of its several parts, so wrought out as to give some conception of the growth of that body of truth which culminates in the incarnate truth of God in Christ. Following this comes the study of that great movement for the dissemination of truth

which we call "missions," in connection with which some knowledge ought to be given of the faiths of the world, and of their relation to the Christian faith, thus furnishing a basis for what is to become a great missionary motive. The responsibility for some of this instruction, such as in the systematized teaching of the Bible as often presented in catechetical form, and in the facts relating to the church as an organization, its nature and its responsibilities, may well be assumed by some other agency than the Sunday school, but closely allied to it and working in harmony with it, as, for instance, the pastor's class, while the instruction in matters relating to specific missions of a particular denomination may be taken up in special missionary classes connected with young people's societies. Care should be taken, however, that these be provided for in some way, and form an inherent part of the system of instruction for all children.

But all teaching must, somehow, center in one final purpose, the effort to secure right conduct, conduct which is the result of the habitual, conscious choice to do the will of God. One of the most valuable services ever performed by psychology is that which has recently given to the world a reasonable explanation of the phenomena of conversion. The teacher need no longer blindly grope his way, striving, with the burden of responsibility constantly weighing him down, to force a moral out of every Scripture verse; but he may rest content to store the child's mind full of facts, closely grouped about the concrete characters of the Bible, and with choice passages to be learned by heart, in the full assurance that, in the fulness of time, God himself will open the door to the heart of the child, so that the truth thus treasured up will find the life and make it free. But when that time of awakening comes, when the boy or girl begins to feel dawning within him or her that larger life with its new powers reaching out on every side, then must parent, pastor, teacher, be awake to his opportunity, and leave no influence unused which might be instrumental in leading the youth to substitute for his own selfish sphere of action that larger horizon of God's world.

It is at this most critical point in the life of the child that

all agencies for religious instruction should converge their forces. Especially ought the home to occupy a prominent place. Instead of leaving the youth to himself, to solve these great mysteries of the larger life alone, all the more care, attention, and sympathy should be bestowed. The studies of the public school, instead of becoming more exacting at this time, should be made easier. As body, mind, and every vital power is in this state of strain, every opportunity for safe and natural readjustment should be given, and the most careful, though unobtrusive, direction given to the new life just dawning.

Right here such societies as the Y. P. S. C. E. and other organizations of similar sort can be of the most helpful service. What the life needs is opportunity to compose itself and to find new points of contact with its new environment. It needs to be surrounded with associations which are bright, inviting, and congenial, and which offer at the same time abundant field for healthful activity. Here is the place to emphasize that religion means primarily conduct, not so much by saying so, however, as by offering inducements to exercise the new power in right ways. Everything possible should be done at this point to prevent the idea that religion is either ritual or creed, and to make clear that it is primarily helpfulness and service.

We may now pause to inquire whither our theory has led us, and whether we were justified in calling it a working hypothesis for religious instruction. We may thus briefly summarize our conclusions :

1. Man is a unity, and a true education must seek to develop symmetrically, harmoniously, and sympathetically the whole life.
2. No system of education is complete which ignores, wholly or in part, the training of man into a conscious relationship with God.
3. Such training must include the elements of worship, belief, and conduct, and should be as carefully adapted to the needs and capacities of the child as any other training.
4. The agencies through which such instruction is to be given are primarily the home and the church. Under the term

"church" are included the Sunday school, the young people's societies, the pastor's class, and other similar organizations.

5. The next needs, in order to secure the most efficient religious instruction, are, first, a more general recognition of the essential place of such instruction in any right system of education, and a stronger determination to secure adequate training for every child. This involves a better popular understanding of the reciprocal relationship which the public school, the home, and the church sustain to each other in the matter of education. In the second place, those agencies which are primarily for religious instruction need to become more definite in aim, more vitally interrelated, more closely federated, and subordinated to one comprehensive plan, in which each shall have its recognized place and its appropriate work. And, finally, within each of these several agencies we may expect a constant improvement of pedagogical method, arranging, adapting, and classifying the material of instruction so that it shall become ever better suited to the needs of the child. When these needs have been met, we may expect a tremendous forward impulse to be given to the whole religious activity of the nation.